

# Squatters and Separation: a synoptic overview

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The Separation of Queensland from New South Wales in December 1859 was an indirect consequence of three upheavals in post-Napoleonic Europe: firstly, the collapse of the Spanish wool flocks, the protection of the Saxon flocks and the industrialisation of the British textiles industry with increased demand for cotton and, more pertinently, merino wool; secondly, a radical, democratic insurgency against restored conservative regimes that produced abortive revolutions and socialist ideology in continental Europe and Chartism in Britain; and thirdly, as a direct result of the preceding two factors, the large-scale emigration to the Australasian colonies of an entrepreneurial, ambitious, capitalist middle class and an impoverished, dispossessed working class – each of which, aspiring to an improved lifestyle, had a dramatic impact on the shaping of the Australian colonies. This paper, drawing on the established historiography, surveys the role that the squatters played in the Separation of pastoral Queensland from a democratising New South Wales. Hence, while avoiding a white triumphalist interpretation – I have published elsewhere on frontier conflict – it might be subtitled ‘in praise of squatterdom’.

## **Pastoral Expansion**

From the mid-1830s an entrepreneurial class of settlers fanned out in two pincer movements from the ‘limits of location’ around Sydney: one pincer moved south-westwards to Port Phillip Bay and western Victoria; another moved north-westwards to New England and the Darling Downs. Within half a decade some 900 individuals occupied a 2500 km long corridor from Australia Felix in western Victoria to the ‘jewel in the diadem of squatterdom’ on the Darling Downs. The seizure of this ‘fertile crescent’ was essentially a massive land grab violating both Indigenous owners and Crown rights – and it continued apace from 1840. In the Northern Districts, New England Pastoral District was gazetted in March 1839, Clarence and Moreton Bay in May 1842, Darling Downs in May 1843, Wide Bay in 1847, Maranoa in November 1848, Port Curtis and Leichhardt in January 1854, and Mitchell and Kennedy in November 1859 on the eve of Separation.

While much of the exploration of the pastoral frontier was carried out at the macro-level by explorers such as Allan Cunningham, Thomas Mitchell,

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Ludwig Leichhardt, Augustus Gregory and George Dalrymple, the real exploration at the micro-level was carried out by the squatters pushing out to the next viable grasslands at perhaps the rate of 300-400 km per year: for example, Patrick Leslie's desperate dash to the Downs in 1840; Henry Stuart Russell's journeys down the Condamine to *Cecil Plains* and up the Mary and Burnett rivers to *Burrandowan* in 1842; the Archer brothers spilling over the Downs Range to the Upper Brisbane Valley (1841-47) and on to the Fitzroy (1853-54); and the Leith-Hay brothers journey from the Downs to the Don and the Dee.<sup>1</sup>

The pastoral boom had three consequences: firstly, the struggle to regulate and hence 'legitimise' the squatters that essentially destroyed the gentry and ersatz aristocratic class; secondly, a change in the meaning of the term 'squatter' from its initial descriptor of a quasi-legal occupant within a settled community to that of, sequentially, gentleman-squatter, grazier and pastoralist; and, thirdly, the Separation of (Victoria, and then) Queensland from New South Wales. I shall look at each of these in turn.

### **The End of the Gentry and the Rise of Squatterdom**

Before the pastoral boom a landed gentry was evolving in New South Wales within the confines of the 'limits of location' – a phenomenon essentially mandated by the Bigge Reports and subsequent gubernatorial actions. Colonial governors quickly realised that those who ventured beyond the 'limits of location' with their sheep flocks generated the greatest revenue for the colony and hence had to be legitimised rather than stopped – while not conceding total control to them. As Keith Hancock noted:

It was impossible to halt their westward march, impossible to refuse them temporary security of tenure, compensation for their improvements, and some limited rights of pre-emption, but the government must not mortgage to them the future of the continent as a field of settlement for the surplus population of the British Isles.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, as JB Hirst has observed, it was the 'proprietors of stock' or 'the respectable establishment of the interior' – that is, the new gentlemen-squatters on the frontier – who in 1836 petitioned Governor Bourke for some form of legitimacy to distinguish them from the 'villainous squatters' around Sydney.<sup>3</sup> Hence, we have the *Squatting Act 1836* with its various amendments in 1839, followed by Governor Gipps' quite reasonable Squatting Regulations (1844) and, finally, the Orders-in-Council (1847) that created the Settled, Intermediate and Unsettled Districts with differing regulations for occupancy and ownership that guaranteed the (temporary) dominance of squatterdom. This political crisis

had been aggravated by its coincidence with the short, sharp depression (and declining wool prices) of the early/mid-1840s.

While Gipps' Regulations were defeated mainly by the efforts of British wool merchants in London, Ken Buckley<sup>4</sup> has rightly argued that colonial opposition was led not by the young, small individual squatter on the frontier<sup>5</sup> but by the older 'big' squatter who was most likely one of the landed gentry ensconced on his freehold land-grant estate near Sydney while operating multiple squatting runs beyond the 'limits': i.e., by those with pretensions to be the local aristocracy as espoused by the Macarthurs, Benjamin Boyd and WC Wentworth. Indeed, John Ritchie has further argued that:

In addition to the populace, the younger squatters had no truck with Wentworth's proposal. They wanted free competition and social fluidity; they did not want a privileged permanent Establishment. Like the bunyip, the idea of a hereditary aristocracy never got off the ground; it was doomed to extinction by colonial reality.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, RW Connell and H Irving, in their analysis of class in Australia, concluded that the emergence of the pastoral frontier disrupted the evolution of a gentry through the squatters' policy of 'wage labour and land piracy'. They conceded that a structured, hierarchical, rural society, approximating a landed gentry, evolved only in Van Diemen's Land, the Western Districts of Victoria and the Darling Downs.<sup>7</sup> Of these we might observe, firstly, that in Van Diemen's Land/Tasmania the gentry so controlled the non-wilderness areas that 'squatters' were forced to cross Bass Strait to establish Port Phillip Bay and Melbourne; secondly, that the collective biographer of the powerful squatterdom of the Western Districts dubbed them, not unkindly, 'men of yesterday';<sup>8</sup> and, thirdly, that on the Darling Downs – the 'home of the pure merinos' – a distinctive rural society was the stuff of romantic reminiscences.

I shall return to the Darling Downs later but in the meantime it is worth noting that one of their number (Arthur Hodgson) observed in 1855: 'During the first five years, two thirds of my capital was lost, during the next five years one third was regained, so that it is only during the last five years that any success had attended my efforts'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is pertinent to note that it was in the third quintile (1850-1855) that the squatters of the Northern Districts backed Separation. They had triumphed over economic and political adversity and now wanted to ensure continued economic prosperity and political dominance in a new Colony.

## Who Were the Squatters?

All contemporary observers were careful to distinguish the *Australian* squatter from the British or American variety; even their inveterate critic JD Lang considered them as ‘perfectly *sui generis*...there is nothing like him in any other part of the British Dominions...[or] in the United States of America’.<sup>10</sup> As Stephen Roberts has noted, squatting had ‘at first a moral significance, and later a vocational one’<sup>11</sup> – a change mandated by the necessity to distinguish thieves operating on the margins of society from the ‘gentlemen’ transforming wasted wilderness to profitable pastoralism. It was the much-maligned Governor Gipps, however, who first, and most aptly, defined the new class of squatters:

The ranks of squatters included young Englishmen of good family, army and navy officers, university graduates, as well as some of the wealthiest men in the colony. They were the real discoverers of the country, and they [can] be said to be... in Australia... the pioneers of civilization.<sup>12</sup>

(He might have added the Scots who constituted 60 per cent of settlers on the Darling Downs.) Frederick Howard, in describing the squatters around Bathurst, noted their background as:

the comfortable upper grades of the British middle classes. On the pastoral frontier... they retained much of their inherited attitudes and they were accorded social status as a matter of course.<sup>13</sup>

However, owing to their distinctive clothing (at least in the early days), he coined the descriptive term, ‘moleskin gentry’. It should be noted, however, that most squatters (whether the sons of England/Scotland or colonial officials) were men on the make or rather men who had to make their own way – with a little help from the family. A cursory case study of the first wave of Darling Downs squatters suffices to illustrate the phenomenon.

The Leslie brothers – Patrick, George and Walter – were the younger sons of a Scottish laird with ancestry dating back to the Middle Ages and links to the prominent Davidson, Farquhar and Macarthur families. With the family estate, *Warthill*, reserved for the eldest son and each son having received a ‘practical education’ in various Aberdonian colleges, they were each provided with a patrimony of £1000 and despatched to Australia where they were to create another ‘*Warthill* in Australia’. They were accompanied by their neighbour Ernest Dalrymple, younger son of a minor baronet with a strong military tradition. Arthur Hodgson was the son of a Church of England clergyman whose family had links to the East India Company and the Bishop of London; after attending Eton and Cambridge University and a brief career as a junior naval officer, Arthur was given a patrimony of £400 and despatched to the colonies where he was later

joined by his brothers, Pemberton and Frank. Henry Stuart Russell, a distant cousin of Hodgson's, was the son of an East India Company official, attended Harrow and Oxford before coming to Australia; the family was of such a social status that Russell was offered but declined becoming aide-de-camp to Gipps. The Gore brothers were, less typically, members of an Anglo-Irish baronetcy: St George gained a BA and MA from Trinity College, Dublin, qualifying as a lawyer, Ralph became a naval officer; Robert a lawyer, St John an army officer and William a Church of England minister; all ended up on the Darling Downs frontier. George Fairholme was linked to the Duke of Atholl and Lord Forbes. At the other end of the social scale the Isaac brothers were the sons of wealthy bankers and the Archer brothers were merchants and traders as were the Leith-Hay brothers, although the latter had relatives of high rank in the army and navy. On the other hand, the Bell and Forbes brothers were the sons of colonial officials and colonially educated, although David Forbes subsequently gained a BA from Trinity, Cambridge.<sup>14</sup> Most of these pioneering squatters were 'birds of passage', intending to make their fortunes in the colonies in a short a time as possible in order to return 'Home' to restore family estates or fortunes or to a leisured retirement.

Although one New England squatter in the late 1830s commented that 'New England is considered the most aristocratic part of NSW, almost all the young settlers are either Oxford or Cambridge', they were *not* aristocratic – nor did they aspire to be:

The squatters were men of a more frenetic 'get-rich-quick breed' than the old landed proprietors... They were middle class battlers. They believed that free enterprise and self-help would lead to progress; they assumed that wealth created by capitalism would be in the interests of all.<sup>15</sup>

Michael Roe defined the squatter as a transplanted Briton from the upper classes characterised by physical (i.e., geographical) mobility and driven by economic necessity who would brook no opposition to his ambition:

His attributes as superman and entrepreneur, his consciousness of 'being a superior caste', caused the squatter to assert himself against the government; he saw himself as being forced into a repellent way of life so that his investments and Australia at large might flourish.<sup>16</sup>

In other words (in a precursor of General Motors): what was good for the squatter was good for the colony and nothing had better get in the way – especially the radical democrats of Sydney.

### Why Separation?

There were four factors driving the Northern Districts squatters' campaign for Separation: firstly, the inadequate lines of communica-

tion by both land and sea to Sydney which initially shaped the demand for *financial* Separation (i.e., local revenues be expended on local public works projects); secondly, the inadequate response to Aboriginal atrocities (i.e., resistance), even though the Orders-in-Council had authorised the formation of a Native Police Force; thirdly, the ongoing shortage of labour following the end of the assignment system which saw the squatters sequentially recruit ticket-of-leave convicts, exiles, Indian coolies, Chinese, Germans and even Aborigines as pastoral labour; and fourthly, the Sydney-based democratic movement.

While each of these played its part, most historians concur that it was the surging democratic/radical movement in Sydney with its platform of popular democracy and land reform that was uppermost in the squatters' motivation. In October 1949 Archibald Boyd of New England wrote a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies which New England historian Robin Walker described as 'a cool analysis of class struggle in the colony'. It listed:

on the one hand the labouring classes, strong in numbers, political organization, and journalistic support, and on the other the flockmasters, conservative, loyal to the Crown, sternly opposed to the democratic tendencies of the town.<sup>17</sup>

Ian McNaughtan claimed 'the northern squatters...were stirred to action by the success of the democratic movement in Sydney' and Manning Clark argued 'the pastoralists of the Darling Downs and out on the Maranoa and the planters in the tropical north wanted to escape from domination by the noisy democrats and ruffians of Sydney'.<sup>18</sup> However, John Ritchie most aptly encapsulates their position: 'They wanted government of the people and for the people, but not by the people'.<sup>19</sup> That is, they wanted good government (by themselves), not self-government (by the masses).

### **The Separation Schedule**

There is insufficient space to narrate the Separation movement but the following is a succinct précis. The short-lived Colony of North Australia (1846) and the *Australian Colonies Act* 1850 confirmed the legal possibility of calving colonies from the mother colony of New South Wales. The arrival in Moreton Bay of Lang's *Artemisia* (December 1848) and *Fortitude* (January 1849) with a cargo of 'radical' migrants spurred the squatters to action. On 23 July 1850 a meeting at Drayton resulted in the formation of a 'Darling Downs Committee' demanding 'financial separation with exiles' which led to the formation of the Northern Districts Separation Association at Ipswich on 8 January 1851. (In the meantime, Brisbane's Langites had formed their own 'separation with representation'

movement.) By August 1852, with the Colonial Office refusing further transportation of convicts, the squatters simply argued for Separation alone (with the matter of labour supply and the border deferred to the new colonial government). In the next few years several Northern District squatters, especially George Leslie and MH Marsh, made representations in London but it was not until after a considerable number of them appeared before a House of Lords Committee on 25 June 1856 that the Colonial Office acceded to Separation on 21 July 1856. The Letters Patent were signed on 6 June 1859, Governor Bowen arrived on 10 December 1859, Governor Denison of New South Wales advised the Queensland electoral distribution on 20 December 1859 and the first Queensland Parliament met on 22 May 1860. The three-year delay between approval and realisation was due, for the most part, to disputes over the NSW/Queensland border and thereby the inclusion/exclusion of the Northern Rivers and New England districts.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Position of the Northern Rivers and New England Squatters**

After the revision of the colonial constitutions in 1850, the northern pastoral districts of New South Wales were constituted as four electorates: the County of Stanley; the United Pastoral Districts of Moreton, Wide Bay, Burnett and Maranoa; the United Pastoral Districts of New England and McLeay; and the United Pastoral Districts of Clarence and Darling Downs. The formation of the last was ‘proof of the general attitude that the Clarence and Richmond would be involved in the new colony’ and led Earl Grey to establish the proposed border initially at 30°S.<sup>21</sup> Most Northern Rivers squatters supported incorporation in the new colony while Casino and Grafton tradesmen and labourers and merchants with strong links to Sydney were opposed; the last especially feared that commercial interests would be swamped in a squatter-dominated new colony.

While it is well-known that Governor Denison and his brothers opposed the Northern Rivers inclusion in Queensland,<sup>22</sup> the leading opponent was Clark Irving, a Sydney-based merchant with commercial and pastoral interests on the Clarence. Louise Daley has described him as ‘not a squatter in outlook, but a businessman, an entrepreneur, and a man of the new generation, the great industrial age’ and, further, he was suspicious of the ‘easy-going attitude of many of the pastoralists whose outlook belonged to a previous generation and whose main attention in the new colony would undoubtedly be focussed on the development of the rich grazing country north and west of Brisbane’.<sup>23</sup> Irving won election as the member for Clarence and Darling Downs in 1856, alienating the squatters with his anti-Separationist views. He established the Grafton Steam Navigation

Company in 1857, the Richmond Steam Navigation Company in 1860 and in 1859 the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* which editorially opposed annexation to Queensland. Irving, probably more than any other individual, detached the Clarence and Richmond from Queensland.

New England squatters were supportive of Separation at a meeting in December 1851 but with the advent of the gold rushes and the ruling out of ‘separation with exiles’, this rapidly waned. Thereafter, New England squatters (with the notable exception of MH Marsh) generally focussed on ensuring Armidale and most of New England territory was excluded from the future colony (by insisting on the border at 28°S) as well as holding on to their ports on the Clarence and Richmond. In this they were assisted by the NSW Government’s timely delivery of public works projects on roads and bridges, although in 1860, as fear of Robertson’s land reforms grew, there was a tentative support for JD Lang’s machinations for yet another separate colony based on the Clarence and New England.<sup>24</sup>

### **Squatting in a Separated Queensland**

At Separation Queensland had 3.5 million sheep, 500 000 cattle, 30 000 white settlers, 24 000 horses, four sawmills, two tanneries, two salting works, one steam flour mill and one pottery. The colony’s First Statistical Report acknowledged that squatting, generating 70 per cent of revenue and 94 per cent of exports, was ‘the only productive interest in the Colony’; the squatters held some 25 million acres compared with the farmers’ 3000 acres.<sup>25</sup> In the next decade ‘the main body of Queensland was filled, from the Maranoa to the Plains of Promise in Carpentaria...and out west to the dry Paroo and Barcoo into the “dead heart”’.<sup>26</sup>

Much of this expansion was driven by Victorian squatters chary of land reform. In 1860 Niel Black, perhaps the most prominent of Western District squatters, remarked: ‘the palmy days of Squatting are at an end in Victoria never to return. Queensland is the land for the Herdsmen nowadays’. In 1876 Thomas Milllear advised that in Queensland there was ‘no fear whatever of selectors for many many years, and before that comes fortunes can be made’. In 1868 a Victorian station of 20 square miles commanded the same price as a 600 square mile station (albeit more arid) in Queensland. Sir Samuel Wilson encapsulated the move northwards, holding 117 000 acres in Victoria, 150 000 in NSW and 2.5 million in Queensland.<sup>27</sup> By the 1880s it was a truism that Toorak was keeping half of Queensland.<sup>28</sup> Such pastoralists, be they sheep or, increasingly, cattle, had a vested interest in maintaining the dominance of squatterdom.

Hugh Wyndham, a Clarence River squatter, remarked: ‘It will be the squatters own fault if they are not by far the strongest party in the northern



colony for some time to come'.<sup>29</sup> And so they were, but not without some conflict. Marsh and George Leslie had initially argued for Crown Colony status (with an appointed Legislative Council advising a governor). While most squatters wanted a partly-elected, partly-appointed single chamber, the Colonial Office opted for a form of representative, responsible government, although, as it turned out, one not based on the manhood suffrage principles on the 1858 Act. The new Queensland Parliament from 1860 to 1873 had a squatter: urban ratio of 2:1.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in October-November 1859, just before Separation, NSW parliamentary members from the Northern Districts (or those sympathetic to northern squatting interests) were exposed as caballing to ensure the squatters dominated the new colonial parliament. Moreover, 'Mort's Parliament' (as this group was dubbed) revealed a growing rift between the 'pure merinos' of the Darling Downs/Moreton region and central Queensland.<sup>31</sup>

During the first parliamentary session, Charles Fitzsimmons and Charles Royds, the squatter representatives for Port Curtis and Leichhardt, complained of the 'villainy' of Brisbane merchants and Darling Downs squatters and raised the issue of the Separation of central Queensland. In May 1873 a Northern Separation league had been formed, sending petitions directly to London. In northern Queensland, where sugar and cattle increasingly challenged sheep, similar concerns about the dominance of Brisbane and the Darling Downs prompted the formation of a Separation League in 1872 with ongoing demands throughout the 1870s for 'financial separation'. However, as Geoffrey Bolton has demonstrated, these separationist moves were more driven by 'the ambitions of small towns that hoped to grow into capital cities' than the squatters and were generally ameliorated (as with the NSW Government's response to Clarence and New England Separation) by the provision of the telegraph and other public works – to Rockhampton and Townsville in particular.<sup>32</sup>

While the northern squatters 'held themselves aloof from the ordinary race of colonials',<sup>33</sup> they were somewhat different from the squattocracy of the southern part of Queensland:

The ambitious newcomers were a different breed from the 'pure merinos', relying more on courage and experience than on breeding or natural right to realize their hopes of prosperity. Many were proven bushmen with squatting experience on southern properties. Others had simply been lucky on Victorian gold-fields. Two dominant features characterized the men of the new pastoral frontier – restlessness and recklessness.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, they were not averse to risk, debt or abandoning one run for another as they gambled on new opportunities. Nor were they challenged by selectors.

## The Squatters and Selection

While many Victorian squatters, complaining of land reform, invested in Queensland's pastoral frontiers, their fears were largely unfounded. Despite Nicholson's (1860), Duffy's (1862) and Grant's (1865/69) Acts, some 100 men owned 1.5 million acres in the mid-1860s and by 1884 only 1.4 million (7.7 per cent) of 18 million acres of alienated land was actually 'farmed'. Similarly, in NSW of 3 million acres sold during 1861-1884 only 1.7 per cent was under cultivation; 96 men owned 8 million acres and, most notoriously, of 170 000 freehold applications only 21 000 survived in 1884. In Queensland some 3 million acres had been freeholded by 1874 but 50 per cent were owned by pastoralists and ten years later only 1.68 per cent (mostly in East and West Moreton and Darling Downs) was cultivated.<sup>35</sup>

The Selection Acts, as both McNaughtan and Ritchie indicate, essentially produced a 'war for the possession of the land' based on the 'ideological conflicts' of the 1840s. While the 'abuses' of the selection process by the squatters is well documented (dummying, peacocking, impounding, bribery etc.), McNaughtan early pointed out the similar 'abuses' by ersatz selectors (or in many cases their publican/storekeeper/miller allies) often compounded by wilful ignorance.<sup>36</sup> The struggle, however, was one-sided with most selection legislation tilted in favour of the squatter. As Ritchie concluded of the land reform or selection movement: 'Between 1860 and 1890 the landtakers became landowners, while the land selectors became a wound in Australia's soul'. More significantly, Ritchie argued: 'There was no agricultural revolution. It was mainly the squatters who bought the land, boosted the revenue and raised wheat production'.<sup>37</sup>

The 'pure merinos' of the Darling Downs are notorious for their supposed opposition to agriculture (as distinct from selection). Most famously, Arthur Hodgson of *Eton Vale* deposed in January 1855:

Take that immense tract of country known as the Darling Downs, which feeds nearly one million sheep, exclusive of cattle and horses – who would be mad enough to attempt cultivation there? If it were practicable, do you not think we would not, one and all, grow wheat for our own consumption?<sup>38</sup>

In 1860 John Watts, Hodgson's managing partner, famously stated: 'The Darling Downs will never grow a cabbage' (although he later claimed he was quoted out of context!).<sup>39</sup> Yet on the other hand we have James Taylor of *Cecil Plains*, no 'pure merino', in October 1860 asserting: 'The country between the Main Range at Toowoomba and Warwick was well suited for agricultural purposes ... was as fine an agricultural country as any in the colony; and if the wealthy squatters entered into the enterprise with spirit,

they would derive a good interest for whatever money they expended upon it'.<sup>40</sup>

Most Darling Downs squatters had introduced horticultural paddocks, orchards and even vineyards by the late 1840s, principally for station consumption. In 1854 squatters formed the Northern Districts' Agricultural and Pastoral Association, modelled on the Scottish Highlands Agricultural Societies, but despite its name the focus was very much on pastoral pursuits (stock grazing, wool, tallow and cotton). It soon, however, faded before the greater demands of a Northern Districts Land Immigration Company and a Mutual Stock Insurance Company. In April 1860, however, motivated by JC White of *Jondaryan* station, Darling Downs squatters proposed the formation of an Agricultural Association of Queensland which six months later became the Darling Downs Agricultural Society with the three aims of improving stock breeding, animal husbandry and ploughing techniques; growing grain, sugar, cotton, coffee and wool; and exhibiting agricultural equipment. By the time of its first show on 11 July 1862 (14 years before the National Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition – the Ekka – had begun in Brisbane) it had been renamed the Royal Agricultural and Pastoral Association and shortly thereafter the Royal Agricultural Society of Queensland. Unfortunately and probably deliberately, its high membership fees excluded local selectors who by August 1864 had formed a counter society called the Drayton and Toowoomba Agricultural and Horticultural Society. For the next 40 years the two societies held rival annual exhibitions in Toowoomba. However, it was the squatters – or at least some of their number (such as GH Davenport of *Headington Hill*) – who had both the financial resources and entrepreneurial skill to experiment innovatively with agricultural techniques, establishing a model for the later selectors.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the 'pure merinos' preferred to view themselves not as agriculturalists (even in the Scottish sense) but as a tightly-knit exclusive society for which, through their memoirs, they created 'a romantic myth of pioneering settlement...[in] a virgin land unspoiled by exploitation or human conflict'.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Romance of the Pure Merinos**

Most of the early (first-wave) squatters were 'birds of passage' intending to make a fortune in order to retire to Britain, or at least a colonial capital, in some measure of comfort but whether successful or not some became entranced by the novelty of their frontier experience.<sup>43</sup> Squatter Henry Stuart Russell and Crown Lands Commissioner Christopher Rolleston each recalled their sojourn on the Downs as the best years of their life. The erratic and peripatetic Pemberton Hodgson, in his *Reminiscences*

of *Australia* (1846), noted in particular the ‘seasons of excitement and danger’; he especially loved the movement, revelry and adventure of the frontier. His more able brother Arthur Hodgson, in a series of emigration lectures in England in 1849, echoed this ‘sensation of absolute freedom’. Similarly, John ‘Tinker’ Campbell, no ‘pure merino’, in his newspaper reminiscence (1875) emphasised the excitement, movement energy and *frisson* of the frontier. Thomas Archer (1881) recalled the ‘manly independence’ of the frontier milieu. Even *Moreton Bay Courier* editor William Wilks in his satirical poem *Raid of the Aborigines* (1848) used the imagery of Homer and Virgil to capture the ‘heroism’ of the frontier.

Thomas Dowse, a Brisbane merchant who regularly visited the Downs squatters in the 1840s, nostalgically recalled (in an 1869 newspaper column) the virtues of the Leslies of *Canning Downs*, the Campbells of *Glengallan* and the occupants of ‘Castle Forbes’ at *Clifton*. Dowse thought the frontier hardships overcome by these ‘men of gentlemanly manners’ would make ‘the most ardent advocate of free selection sympathise with these adventurous men’; he regretted that the ‘pioneer gentlemen gave way to the plebeian overseer’. It was Dowse who established the iconic image of Patrick Leslie as the preferred archetype of squatterdom: ‘their bold brother Paddy – gods, what a contrast, [was] of the bullocky-bullocky, but right good fellow, only rub his fur down the right way’. Such imagery was taken up by Stephen Roberts, the main historian of the squatting age: ‘[Patrick Leslie was] the very type of squatting pioneer...Absolutely fearless and something of a rough jewel, he was active and energetic, “hail-fellow-well-met”...[and] the prince of bushmen’. Subsequent historians are somewhat less impressed with Leslie’s abilities.<sup>44</sup>

It was Henry Stuart Russell’s memoir *Genesis of Queensland: an account of the first exploring journeys to and over the Darling Downs... and a resume of the causes which led to separation from New South Wales* that contributed most to the romantic myth. It was published during the centenary year of European settlement in a desperate attempt by Russell to recover his lost fortune and, therefore, is replete with nostalgic, sometimes mawkish, romanticism. Recalling the jollity of inter-station visits, the practical jokes, the pleasurable passage of days, the racing of thoroughbred horses, and the mad, carefree, headlong dash across the plains at full gallop, he longed for ‘the throng of merry cavaliers of the olden times’ and opined: ‘Would that little world could have stood still’.<sup>45</sup>

The sense of exclusivity on the Darling Downs was there from the start. In a letter dated 20 June 1841, Walter Leslie reassured his mother:

It is now the case that any new district is much more respectably peopled than the older parts of the Colony from the influence of that rare commodity in the younger days of the Colony – Gentlemen.<sup>46</sup>

The Downs in particular was settled by such a commodity, rather than ‘riff-raff’. It was similarly noted by the Leslies’ Macarthur connections that the brothers were ‘surrounded by at least a dozen young men with whom they can associate’ and Patrick Leslie recorded that *Canning Downs* was ‘surrounded by good neighbours, all Gentlemen and mostly countrymen of our own’. (They particularly noted members of the Dalrymple, Fairholme, Farquharson, Gordon and Campbell families but also included the Hodgson and Russell connections, while excluding ‘Snobs’.) The superiority of the Downs ‘pure merinos’ was asserted in the *Moreton Bay Courier*, 5 August 1854 by their opponent Lang who attributed the following description to *Beauaraba* squatter JJ Whit(t)ing: ‘The Darling Downs squatters were far, far above everybody else in the Moreton Bay districts: as high above them as Haman’s gallows was above all other gibbets – or as the Downs was above the sea’.<sup>47</sup>

It should be noted that most of these early youthful, gentlemen-squatters (the Leslies, Hodgsons, Fairholme, Forbes, Dalrymple etc) had departed the Downs by the late 1850s; only the Gores of *Yandilla* and Bells of *Jimbour* persisted later into the century. The ‘pure merino’ society, with substantial residences in pastoral villages, was then sustained by Watts at *Eton Vale*, the Ramsays at *Harrow*, the Kings at *Gowrie*, the Kents at *Jondaryan*, the Beits at *Westbrook* and Tooth at *Clifton*. (The last especially was notorious for maintaining a ‘liveried’ estate – and after his death in 1876 local selectors facetiously renamed Mt Tooth as Mt Molar.)

Nevertheless, it was this first wave of squatters who founded a distinctive society, separated Queensland from New South Wales and created a historical romance. One of the later ‘pure merinos’, Oscar de Satge, argued that his predecessors:

leave little to be desired in the way of reputation for industry, courage, honesty of purpose, and absolute good faith; their word being their bond; their agreements seldom written, their servants well used, their animals cared for, and their homesteads open to the most ungrudging hospitality, and what can a country desire more in the founders of her early history? <sup>48</sup>

However, it was John Watts, initiator of the annual ‘Harvest Homes’ on *Eton Vale*, who best encapsulated the self-perceived place of the squatter in Australian history:

I know there are many who think the original settlers, the squatters, pastoralists or whatever they may be called, were a great nuisance, and never should have been permitted to take up this beautiful country, and that they have

stood in the way of settlement, but I ask the question what would Australia have done without them? If it had not been for them the great interior of this great continent would never have been known. By their pluck and indomitable perseverance, risking their lives, their capital, and all as much for the advancement of others as themselves.<sup>49</sup>

The pastoral stage, and hence the squatters, were seen as the essential precondition for the civilizing of the Australian continent – as, indeed, they were for separating Queensland from New South Wales.

### Endnotes

- 1 Maurice French, 'In Search of Another Warhill: A Scottish Migration to New South Wales in the 1830s', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 73, Part 3, December 1987, pp. 187-204; Henry Stuart Russell, *Genesis of Queensland*, Sydney, 1888, *passim*; Thomas Archer, *Recollections of a Rambling Life*, Yokohama, 1897, pp. 53, 133-4, 156; JW Collinson, 'From the Downs to the Don and the Dee: The Story of the Brothers, Leith-Hay', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland [JRHSQ]*, vol. 3, no 6, December 1947, pp. 466-71.
- 2 WK Hancock, *Australia*, Brisbane, Jacaranda, 1965 [first published London, 1930], p. 11.
- 3 JB Hirst, *Convict Society and Its enemies*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1983, p. 148.
- 4 K Buckley, 'Gipps and the Graziers of New South Wales 1841-1846' in JJ Eastwood and FB Smith (eds), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, First Series, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1964, pp. 57-102.
- 5 See Ruth Kerr, 'Moreton Bay Pastoralists Association and its role in the squatters' opposition to Governor Gipps', *Queensland History Journal*, vol. 20, no. 11, August 2009, pp. 568-77 for the involvement of the Moreton Bay/Darling Downs squatters.
- 6 John Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, Melbourne, Heinemann, 1975, p. 61.
- 7 RW Connell and H Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1980. pp. 53, 54.
- 8 Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday: a social history of the western district of Victoria 1834-1890*, Melbourne Melbourne University Press, 1961. The descriptor is confined to the title, but see ch. 19 for an apt summation of the class.
- 9 *Moreton Bay Free Press*, 23 January 1855.
- 10 JD Lang, *Cookland in North Eastern Australia*, London, 1847, p. 292.
- 11 Stephen H Roberts, *The Squatting Age in Australia 1835-1847*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1970, p. 64 [first published 1935].
- 12 Gipps cited in R M Younger, *Australia for the Australians*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1970, p. 159. Gipps' description was largely accepted by Roberts, *Squatting Age*, p. 304.
- 13 Frederick Howard, *The Moleskin Gentry in which certain close relatives of Major John Bowler, of the 80<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, recall the life and times of the family ...*, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1978, p. 2.
- 14 The background of the Darling Downs squatters is elaborated in Maurice French, *A Pastoral Romance: The Tribulation and Triumph of Squatterdom*, Toowoomba, University College of Southern Queensland Press, 1990, ch. 10.
- 15 Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, p. 61.
- 16 Michael Roe, *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia 1835-1851*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1965, pp. 116, 118.

- 17 Robin Walker, *Old New England*, Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1966, p. 153.
- 18 Ian McNaughtan, 'Colonial Liberalism 1851-92' in Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: a social and political history*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1955, p. 110; CMH Clark, *A History of Australia, vol. IV, The Earth Abideth Forever 1851-1888*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, p. 136.
- 19 Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, p. 65.
- 20 The full story of Separation is told in French, *A Pastoral Romance*, ch. 6.
- 21 Louise Daley, *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1966, p. 72.
- 22 Raphael Cilento and Clem Lack, *Triumph in the Tropics: an historical sketch of Queensland*, Brisbane, Smith and Robinson, 1959, p. 159.
- 23 Daley, *Men and a River*, p. 74. Also see LT Daley, "Irving' Clark (1808-1865)" in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1972, p. 462.
- 24 Walker, *Old New England*, pp. 156-7; Robyn O'Hara, 'The influence of the Moreton Bay Separation Movement in New England and the Clarence', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, no. 11, 1968, pp. 2-19.
- 25 CJ R Linge, *Industrial Awakening: A Geography of Australian Manufacturing 1788-1890*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1979, p. 663; Cilento and Lack, *Triumph in the Tropics*, pp. 388-9.
- 26 Roberts, *Squatting Age*, pp. 177-8.
- 27 Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*, pp. 276 (Black, Milllear), 469-70 (Wilson).
- 28 GL Buxton, '1870-90' in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1974, p. 181.
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- 30 W Ross Johnston, *The Call of the Land: a history of Queensland to the present day*, Brisbane, Jacaranda, 1982, pp. 31, 98; Cilento and Lack, *Triumph in the Tropics*, p. 388.
- 31 French, *A Pastoral Romance*, pp. 124-5, 164.
- 32 Lorna McDonald, *Rockhampton: A History of City and District*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1981, pp. 539-41; Geoffrey Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1972, pp. 42, 143.
- 33 Anne Allingham cited in Ross Fitzgerald, *From the Dreaming to 1915: A History of Queensland*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1982, p. 197.
- 34 Fitzgerald, *From the Dreaming*, p. 134.
- 35 WK Hancock, *Australia*, p. 13; John Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, p. 109-110; Ian McNaughtan in Greenwood, *Australia*, pp. 119-20.
- 36 McNaughtan in Greenwood, *Australia*, pp. 115-22; Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, p. 111.
- 37 Ritchie, *Australia as once we were*, pp. 108, 109.
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- 39 DB Waterson, *Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper: A History of the Darling Downs 1859-93*, Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1968, p. 95; John Watts, *Personal Reminiscences*, unpublished m/s, Allendale, Wimborne, UK, 1901, p. 55.
- 40 *Darling Downs Gazette*, 11 October 1860.
- 41 French, *A Pastoral Romance*, pp. 176-9; Waterson, *Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper*, pp.62-3.

- 42 Waterson, *Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper*, p. 11.
- 43 The documentation for what follows (unless otherwise stated) is given in French, *A Pastoral Romance*, ch. 10.
- 44 SH Roberts, *Squatting Age*, p. 175. The debunking of Leslie has been most recently narrated by Marion Diamond, 'The Myth of Patrick Leslie', *Queensland History Journal*, vol. 20, no. 11, August 2009, pp. 606–18 but has been previously hinted at, in varying degrees in several sources: KGT Waller's entry on Leslie in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2 (1967), pp. 107-108; Jan Ward-Brown, *Rosenthal – Historic Shire*, Rosenthal Shire Council, 1989, pp. 8-27; Jane de Falbe, *My Dear Miss Macarthur: The Recollections of Emmeline Maria Macarthur*, Kenthurst, Kangaroo Press, 1988, pp. 95, 108, 110, 111, 112, 114; Maurice French, *Conflict on the Condamine: Aborigines and the European Invasion*, Toowoomba: DDIP, 1989 chs 4, 5; French, *Explorations in Frontier History*, Toowoomba: USQ Press, 1997, ch. 2; and French, *A Pastoral Romance*, pp. 205-9.
- 45 HS Russell, *Genesis of Queensland*, Sydney, Turner and Henderson, 1888, pp. 353, 394.
- 46 Walter Leslie to Mother, 20 June 1841 in Letters of the Leslie Brothers in Australia 1834-1860, in John Oxley Library OML 71-43. Subsequent references to Leslie correspondence come from this source; also see Maurice French, *A Pastoral Romance*, pp. 169-70.
- 47 Joshua John Whiting (1811-1858) had been court-martialled from the Army for duelling, migrated to Australia and joined the Mounted Police before acquiring *Beauaraba* with H P Hicks in 1844; he changed his name to Whitting to obscure his dishonourable discharge.
- 48 Oscar de Satge, *Pages from the Journal of a Queensland Squatter*, London, 1901, p. 202.
- 49 John Watts, *Personal Reminiscences*, p. 33.